

BUILDING RANKS

K-12 | A Comprehensive Framework
for Effective School Leaders

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FOREWORD

Great schools have great leaders. That axiom has been the guiding principle that has driven the creation of **Building Ranks** and the *Breaking Ranks* publications that preceded it for more than two decades—giving you, the school leader, the resources, strategies, and inspiration required to prepare each of your students for lifelong success in a rapidly changing world.

The title of this latest installment of the *Breaking Ranks* series reflects a shift in focus: *Breaking Ranks* is now **Building Ranks**. In concert with the name change, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) has expanded the focus to include the leadership domains and dimensions that help achieve our shared goal of helping each student succeed. At the same time, **Building Ranks** narrows the lens to focus on you—the leader of not just any school, but your own school—and on the unique context in which your school operates. Its charge is to help you develop and enhance the impact that you, as principal, can have in your school and in the learning community it serves.

Informed by the real-world experiences of principals in the field, **Building Ranks** is grounded in best practices and aligned with the National Policy Board for Educational Administration’s Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) and other educational leadership standards. But **Building Ranks** also challenges you to push beyond the standards. That means acknowledging the need to educate and ensure the well-being of the whole child by fostering and sustaining an environment responsive to a school’s and community’s specific needs. It also means rethinking that environment in the context of a changing global environment and creating structures that allow innovation and entrepreneurship to become foundational elements of your school.

Principalship is no small task. Leadership matters, but it must be applied purposefully and deliberately to support the specific needs of your school, its unique culture, and its instructional needs in ways that ensure that each student’s academic success and well-being are cultivated by teachers and staff who also see themselves as adult learners supported in their own professional aspirations. Identifying the specific levers that allow you to build culture and lead learning relies on your expertise not just as a school leader but also as your school’s leader, and on your understanding of your school’s unique learning community and of how best to sustain and support its continued growth.

In short, your school’s success begins and ends with you. We hope that **Building Ranks** will help you chart your own course for growth in the service of your colleagues, your communities, and most importantly, the children we collectively serve.

JoAnn Bartoletti
Executive Director, NASSP

BUILDING RANKS: A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

As a principal, your school's success begins and ends with you. No matter what kind of school you lead, as school leaders we all start with a common purpose—preparing each child for success in a global community. We do so in part by ensuring that each adult in our learning communities continues to grow, both personally and professionally, in service of our students.

Building Ranks reflects NASSP's understanding of the expansive role we as school leaders play in times of rapid change. It is designed to help you chart your own course for continued growth and for the growth of your school community. **Building Ranks** focuses on two essential domains of school leadership—*building culture* and *leading learning*—and provides guidance for how you can strategically apply them to help prepare each child for success in college, citizenship, career, and life.

As with students, no two schools or school leaders are exactly alike. Nor are the strategies, skills, or dispositions that you bring to bear on leading your school in ways that support its culture, students, and community. NASSP developed **Building Ranks** for you, to meet your needs as the leader of not just any school, but your school.

The Building Ranks Model

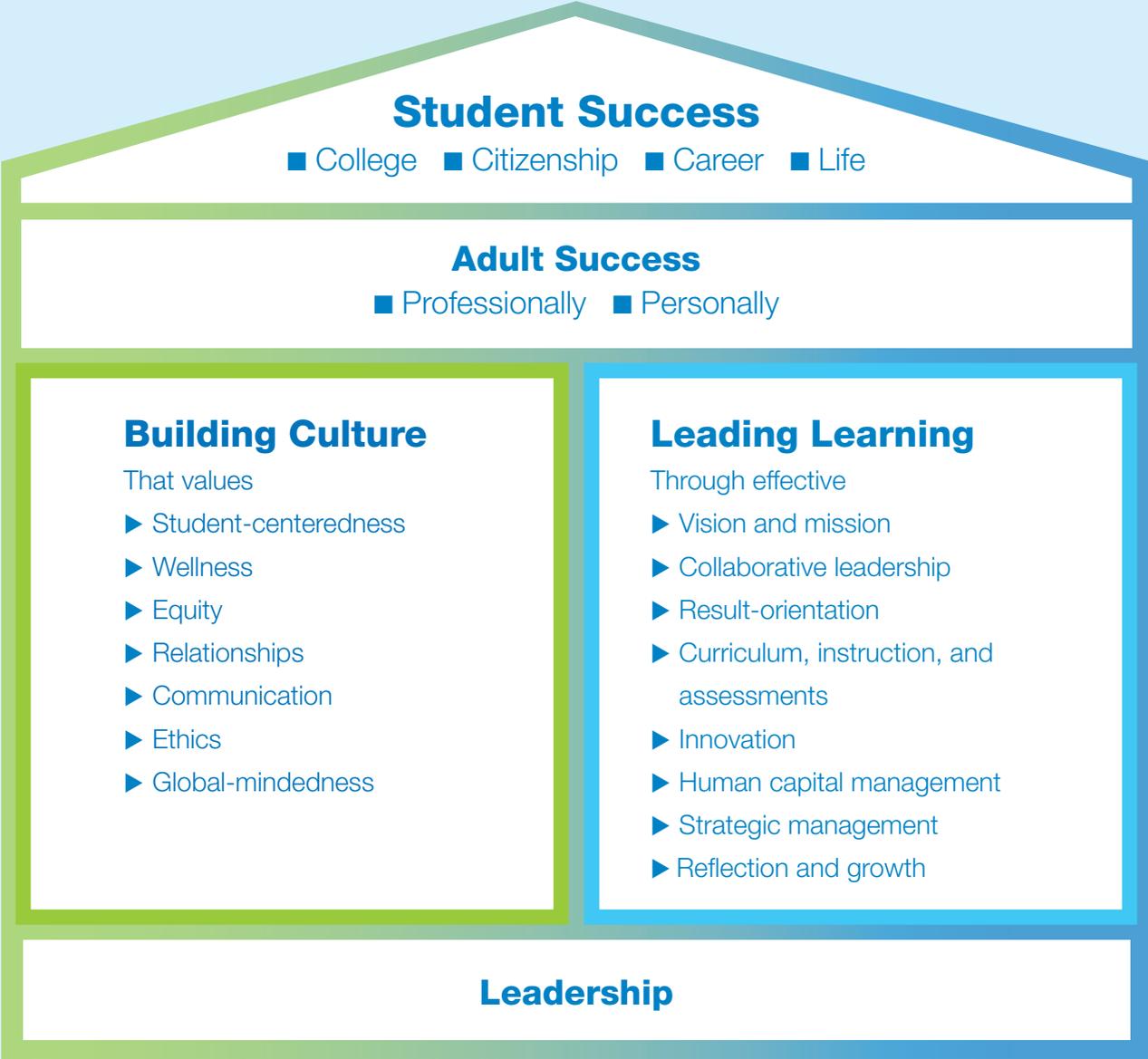
In developing the **Building Ranks** framework, NASSP started with the “why”—the purpose of school leadership, a theme reinforced throughout the book. Leaders who want to encourage desired behaviors and outcomes more effectively must start with the why, rather than explaining the “what.” By focusing on our common purpose—preparing each child, across all grade levels and school types, for success in a global community—we as school leaders stay energized and engaged.

As illustrated in Figure 1: The **Building Ranks** Logic Model, the framework builds on our shared purpose. As school leaders, we operate through the two essential domains of school leadership, each of which have discrete dimensions that, when applied deliberately, enable you to support and lead the adults who prepare and nurture your students.

“In so many ways, school principals are the linchpin of American education... **Building Ranks** is the guide every principal needs to become a modern leader and to turn his or her school into a 21st-century learning powerhouse.”

—**Daniel H. Pink**
Author of *Drive* and *When*

FIGURE 1. THE **NASSP BUILDING RANKS** LOGIC MODEL



Building Ranks is grounded in best practices of highly accomplished school leaders and an expert synthesis of research. It is aligned with the National Policy Board for Educational Administration’s (NPBEA) Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) and other educational leadership standards. As the latest evolution of how NASSP envisions school leadership first articulated in *Breaking Ranks* nearly twenty-five years ago, **Building Ranks** sharpens the focus to you and your leadership.

As such, **Building Ranks** is not a one-size-fits-all framework or a linear step-by-step process. Instead, it is a highly flexible tool that will help you lead not just any school, but *your* school community. It combines elements of both theory and practice, as informed by the real-world experiences of successful school leaders. And it offers a comprehensive range of specific leadership practices, strategies, and actions you can choose from to serve the needs of your own learning community.

THE DOMAINS AND DIMENSIONS OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

School leaders operate from two key domains to prepare each student for success:

- Building and sustaining a healthy culture
- Leading learning within their specific communities

As with the continuous improvement cycles that guide so many of our activities within learning communities, **Building Ranks** is structured to help you revisit your practice on an ongoing basis to identify emerging leadership opportunities and continue to grow personally and professionally.

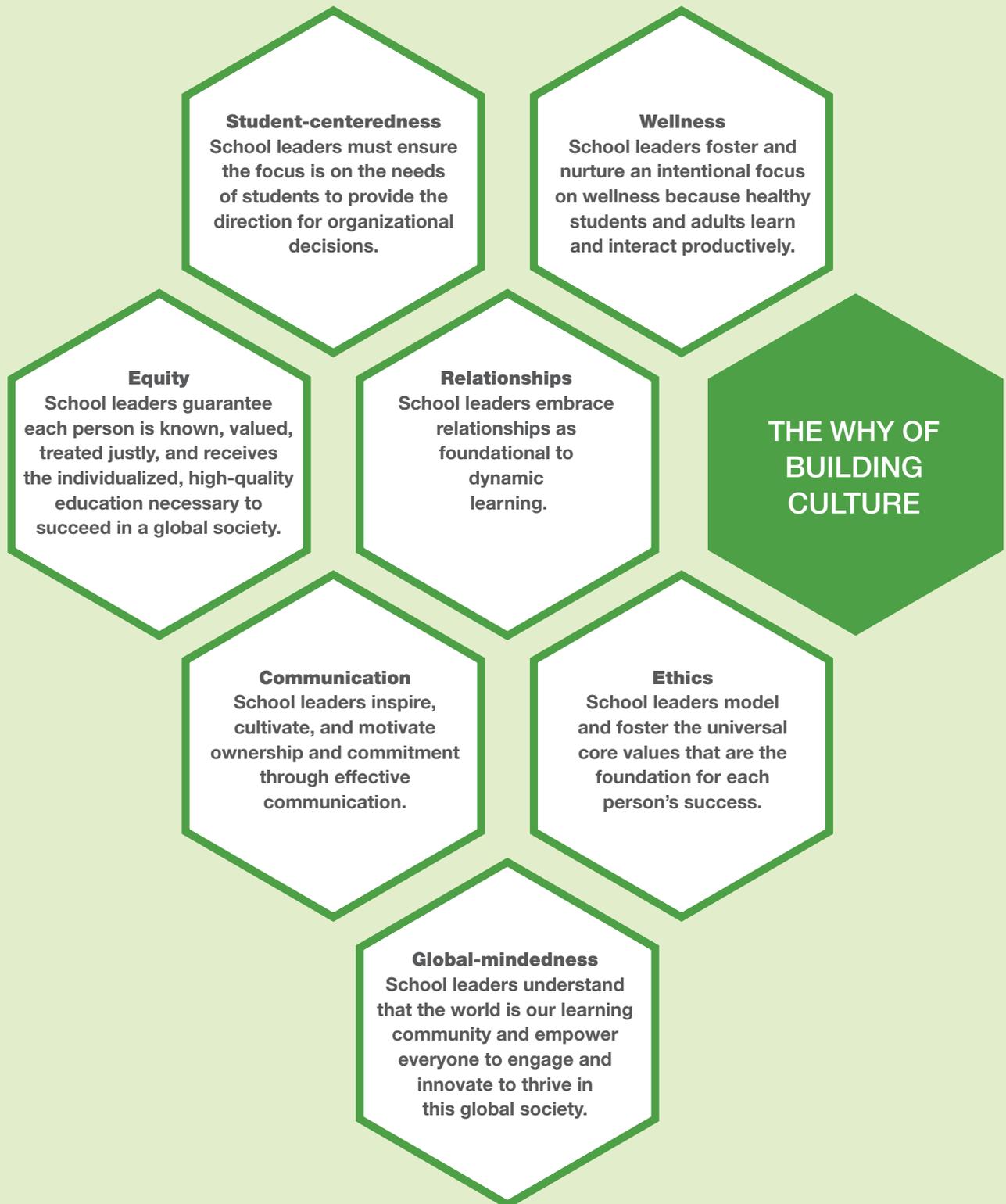


Building Culture

As principal, you support learning through a school culture where each person—student and adult alike—is understood and supported as he or she works toward his or her full potential. As the communities our schools serve continue to change, you also ensure that each adult within the learning community works to meet the needs of the whole child. For our purposes, an effective school culture is defined as an environment that *nurtures each individual to live the shared norms, values, and beliefs to grow in a safe, caring, and high-performing school community.*

Building Ranks reflects the expansive ways you as a leader can shape your school’s culture. The illustration on page 5 details the specific dimensions of building culture and why each is important.

FIGURE 2. THE **NASSP BUILDING RANKS** DIMENSIONS OF BUILDING CULTURE





Leading Learning

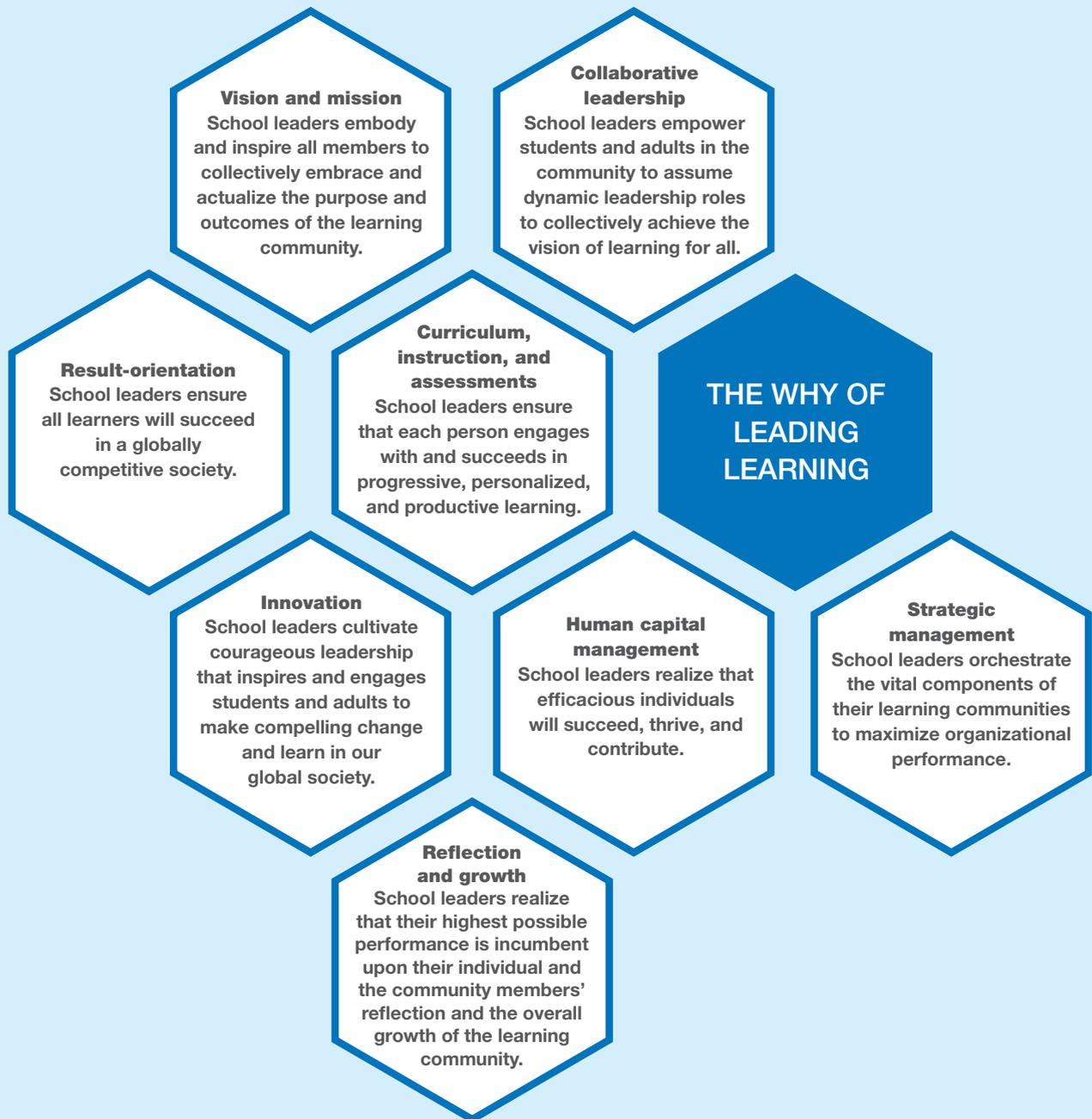
As the core function of your school, learning is the top priority among all the countless obligations and responsibilities that compete for your time. As a leader today, your role in leading learning extends beyond the traditional metrics of student achievement, and far beyond the classroom. For our purposes, leading learning involves *empowering each individual to apply the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to grow and contribute productively in a global society.*

Building Ranks reflects the many ways in which you influence the impact of teaching and learning in your school. As with building culture, the figure on page 7 details the specific dimensions of leading learning and why each is important.

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—**David Coleman**
President and CEO,
The College Board

FIGURE 3. THE **NASSP BUILDING RANKS** DIMENSIONS OF LEADING LEARNING



HOW BUILDING RANKS IS STRUCTURED

Building Ranks is designed to meet your specific needs—now and over time, as your leadership practice and context continues to evolve.

Section 1 offers a definition of what successful school leadership looks like in today's challenging contexts and provides an overview of the **Building Ranks** framework.

Sections 2 and 3 detail the multiple leadership dimensions of the building culture and leading learning domains. For each dimension, these sections include:

- A definition and a why statement that tells how each dimension helps school leaders build the rationale for a strong school culture
- An explanation of the dimension's relevance
- Strategies that show how school leaders can use the dimension as a lever to build culture and lead learning, including:
 - What the strategy looks like in practice, with examples from the field
 - Steps and additional actions leaders can take, along with key resources
 - Questions for reflection
- How each dimension fits in the **Building Ranks** framework
- Additional resources, including tools, recommended readings, and videos

An **afterword** provides an opportunity to reflect on the material presented in the book and offers examples of how you can use the **Building Ranks** framework to shape your role in your school, district, and community. It includes tools to track your personal and professional growth as a leader, as well as some final thoughts on how to use this book as an ongoing resource within your learning community.

HOW TO USE BUILDING RANKS

Building Ranks was designed for you to use in whatever way best meets your leadership needs and the opportunities within your learning community. Among the ways you can use the book:

- An initial read can help you understand the elements of successful school leadership and anchor you in the **Building Ranks** framework.
- You could refer to specific leadership dimensions for practical advice, strategies for specific areas of growth, and connections to other skills and dimension.
- You could dip in and out of the descriptions of different dimensions at different times as events and ongoing reflection reveal new opportunities for personal growth.
- As part of ongoing continuous improvement and self-reflection, you could return regularly to **Building Ranks** for additional insights into your practice as it evolves, with or without the support of a coach or instructional supervisor.
- To build the collective leadership capacity of your learning community, you could use **Building Ranks** as part of book study, reflection, or professional development activities with leadership team members or other emerging leaders.
- Districts and states can use the framework to support and refine their professional learning opportunities for school leaders.

AN EXAMPLE OF HOW TO USE BUILDING RANKS

*What follows is a hypothetical example of how a school leader might use **Building Ranks** to address a problem of practice. The graphics used in this example are excerpts from **Building Ranks**.*

Principal Janet Jones comes to **Building Ranks** knowing the culture in her school represents a growth area for her learning community—and for herself as a leader. She reviews the dimensions of building culture described on page 5, reflecting on which dimensions are areas of strength and weakness for her, her leadership team, and her learning community.

After identifying relationships as a particular area of growth for her learning community, Jones reads **Building Ranks'** definitions of the different types of relationships within an effective learning community (pictured on page 10) in the introduction to the dimension. After reflecting on various types of relationships in the context of her own school and considering feedback from her leadership team, Jones determines that her personal relationships with other stakeholders in the learning community represents the greatest area of professional growth through which she could enhance the school's culture.

- Strong **staff member-to-staff member** relationships are characteristically open, productive, and trusting. Staff members care about one another and are committed to each other's success. School leaders understand and support staff members' needs and interests.

- Strong school relationships with **families** and **community** are asset-based, focusing on the strengths that the community has to offer. Family and community values inform the school vision and mission. Families and community members understand and are supportive of school goals.

- Strong **principal** relationships with all stakeholders are open and trusting. They are characterized by regular communication that makes everyone feel valued. These relationships serve as a model and set the tone for all other relationships.

Building Ranks Connections

Leaders' efforts to build relationships overlap with several leadership dimensions, including the following:

- Communication skills (p. 93)
- Efforts to lead collaboratively (p. 140)
- Equitable opportunities across differences (p. 68)
- Wellness (p. 58)
- Professional learning and management (p. 185)

After reviewing the list of strategies in the Relationships dimension, Jones determines that the first strategy detailed in the relationship dimension—being approachable, accessible, and welcoming to students, staff members, families, and community members—represents the strongest opportunity for her personal and professional growth as a leader. Reading through the practical advice detailed in the strategy, Jones notes that the example of Kim Buckheit, a middle school principal who instituted deliberate end-of-day walks to foster spontaneous conversations with staff members (pictured below), resonates strongly with her own leadership style. She resolves to put it into place at her own school, and then moves to the steps and additional actions listed (pictured on page 11) for additional insight and inspiration. After perusing the list of steps and actions, Jones realizes that the action of establishing office hours would also be a good fit for her school and its culture.

KIM BUCKHEIT

FORMER PRINCIPAL, TROY HOWARD MIDDLE SCHOOL, MAINE

Traditional middle school with 400 students, 56 percent receiving free and reduced-price lunch and 2 percent minority

Years as principal: 18; Years at school: 11

Key action: Using deliberate end-of-day walks to foster spontaneous conversations with staff members

Steps and additional actions to be approachable, accessible, and welcoming to students, staff members, families, and community members:

- Be visible. Make yourself accessible and encourage impromptu conversations by being visible during key transitions such as arrival, dismissal, and lunch.
- Establish office hours. To address time constraints, consider establishing and communicating set office hours. Encourage staff members' interaction by specifying times that have been explicitly reserved for their questions and input.
- Hold "fireside chats." Convene a small group of teachers, staff members, and students to discuss a particular issue of relevance in your school (e.g., recent issues with cheating or current news events in the local, national, or global community).
- Consider community outreach. Parent coffees, presentations to community organizations, and public meetings all represent opportunities to serve as the public face of your school and the students it serves.

Moving to the reflection questions found at the end of each strategy in **Building Ranks**, a question about involving the community in school activities catches her eye.

Reflections on being approachable, accessible, and welcoming to students, staff members, families, and community members:

- To what extent do students, staff members, and parents view you as accessible? Are there subgroups of people (racial, economic, gender, or other backgrounds) who might not view you as accessible? What concrete data or examples can you provide to support your response?
- How do you prefer to communicate with staff members and others in your community (e.g., spontaneous vs. scheduled, face-to-face vs. email)? What steps have you taken to communicate those preferences to others in your school? What steps have you taken to become more comfortable with other communication formats?
- In what ways do you balance the need to be accessible with the demands and time constraints of your role as principal?
- Think about the last opportunity you had to meet with a group of parents, staff members, or students. How would each group describe that meeting to their friends?
- When is the next opportunity you have to involve the community in a school activity? What plans will you need to make for this to happen?

While Jones was initially focused on becoming more personally accessible to staff as part of her reflection, she recognizes the potential benefits of being more intentional about involving community members in school activities. She identifies engaging her leadership team in doing so as another potential action step beyond her own personal growth as a leader.

Jones turns to one of the worksheets included in the Afterword of **Building Ranks** to articulate these actions as part of an intentional personal growth plan, as illustrated below.

Leadership Dimension Journey Log		
Dimension: Relationships	Date Started: 10/1	Date Ended: 4/1
Strategies and activities: What strategies and activities will you use to develop this dimension?		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>Begin deliberate end-of-day walks at least 2x/week</i> ■ <i>Implement office hours</i> ■ <i>Engage leadership team in involving community in school activity</i> 		

For Jones, this is only the beginning. Along with her personal efforts to become more accessible, she will work with her leadership team to identify the resources and staff required to enhance the sense of inclusiveness within the learning community. Later in the year, she will use this log to reflect on the progress she has made as a leader in fostering strong relationships and to identify areas of continued growth.

But before putting the book down, Jones returns to the connections between relationships and the other leadership dimensions in the **Building Ranks** framework (pictured at right). Noticing the close link between relationships and communication skills, Jones resolves to make communication her next area of personal growth. She knows her learning as a leader is never done, and this will represent the next step in the ongoing journey of growth—both for her as a leader and for her school community.

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YOUR PERSONAL JOURNEY

Jones' example is just that—an example of just one of the many ways you can use **Building Ranks** to guide your leadership efforts. The book, and the aligned resources in the box below, are designed to help you chart your own path as you lead your learning community on a journey of continuous evolution and growth.

BEYOND BUILDING RANKS

Building Ranks does not begin and end in the pages of this book. NASSP is developing a series of aligned online resources, including:

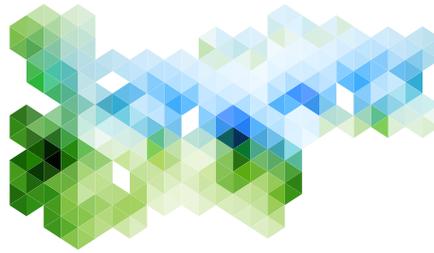
- **An online assessment tool**—a diagnostic tool to identify the areas of strength and areas of growth of a school leader's practice
- **A leadership 360° survey** to compare a school leader's perceptions with those of his or her supervisor, teachers, and staff
- **A school culture survey** to reveal how the school leader, students, teachers, staff, parents, and community leaders experience the school's culture

START WITH WHY

This executive summary focuses on how school leaders can use **Building Ranks** as a tool to attend to their personal and professional growth as a leader. But what matters most is how *you* can use it to sustain the ongoing evolution of your own leadership and your learning community.

The why for the vision of leadership captured in **Building Ranks** is clear across all grade levels and all types of schools—preparing each student for success in college, citizenship, career, and life, while ensuring that each adult in the learning community continues to grow, both personally and professionally, in the service of those students and the community they represent. But it is up to you—not just as a school leader, but as the leader of *your* school and its unique learning community—to find the why that will drive your own personal growth and that of your school and each of its students and adults. This book, as well as the aligned resources available through NASSP, are designed to help you do just that.

For more information on the full suite of **Building Ranks** products, visit nassp.org/buildingranks.



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— **David Coleman**

President and CEO, The College Board

“**Building Ranks** is an educational leadership book for our time! At once practical and inspirational, it provides school leaders with strategies, illustrations, and resources to help strengthen their practice.”

— **Linda Darling-Hammond**

President and CEO, Learning Policy Institute

“**Building Ranks** is a must-read for superintendents! It is full of...insightful examples from around the country on successful school systems and underscores district and school leader collaboration requisite for each student’s success.”

— **Daniel Domenech**

Executive Director, AASA, The School Superintendents Association

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— **Todd Whitaker**

Author, Speaker, and Professor at University of Missouri
